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ABSTRACT

The importance of parent participation in a child's education is undisputed, and low-income urban parents can and want to help with their children's schooling, both at home and at school, as much as do middle class parents. However, most poor urban children live in single-parent, female-headed households--often Black or Hispanic--and many school officials tend to decide in advance that single and working parents cannot be approached or relied upon. Since parents' involvement in school activities can be related to the flexibility of leave policies on their jobs employers should be encouraged to allow flextime to enable working parents to observe their children in the classroom or attend meetings. Home-based learning is one of the most efficient ways for parents to spend their time; when teachers help parents help their children, these parents' activities can be as effective as those of parents with more education and leisure, whom teachers expect to help their children. Suggestions are offered for improving both school-based participation and home-based learning. A list of references is included. (BJV)

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The importance of a child's home, and parent participation in school activities, to learning is undisputed. Therefore, it is unfortunate that the poor achievement of low-income urban students has often coexisted with a perceived lack of parent interest in schooling, creating a tendency to lift the burden of these children's academic failure from the schools by blaming their parents' lack of involvement in education. In fact, conversely, low-income parents can and want to help with their children's schooling—both at home and at school. Thus, teachers and other school staff need reach out to parents in ways they can respond to, and help them help their children.

The Low-Income Urban Parent

Poverty weighs most heavily on urban children. Most of these poor urban children live in the growing number of single parent, female-headed households, where low wages and unemployment make life an increasing economic battle. Among blacks and Hispanics living in poor urban neighborhoods, the proportion of female-headed families is particularly high.

Even when a man is present in the household, families are increasingly comprised of children with more than one parental relationship. Since many mothers of school-age children are in the work force, not only stepmothers, but custodial mothers, and a variety of paid helpers, are all part of the complicated and imperfect patchwork of childcare.

School-Based Activities and Single and Working Parents

Research suggests that the more parents participate in schooling, in a sustained way, at every level—in advocacy, decision-making and oversight roles, as fundraisers and boosters, as volunteers and paraprofessionals, and as home teachers—the better for student achievement (Gordon, 1978). However, given the pressures of daily life on urban parents, a number of questions are raised about whether schools can engage poor, single, or working parents, who may be busier or have more troubled households than middle-class parents.

Understandably, educators, whose own time and resources are limited, are wary about expending insufficient effort in generating parent involvement. Yet, school personnel tend to decide in advance that single and working parents cannot be approached or relied on (Epstein, 1984, March). Though there may be a vast distance between parents' worry or concern and their actually reaching out, single working parents as well as dual working parent families are especially likely to want more contact and consultation with teachers, and they are as dissatisfied as the teachers about any loss of contact (The Metropolitan Life Survey, 1987).

In both dual working parent and single working parent families, parents' involvement in school activities is usually partly related to the flexibility of leave policies on their jobs. While most employers are still rigid about the time and hours they demand of their workers, they can be encouraged to allow flextime for working parents, and to extend short leaves beyond emergencies, so that parents can observe their children in the classroom or attend meetings (Espinosa, R., 1985). Where a corporation employs a large number of parents, times can actually be arranged with the employer for parent-teacher conferences and school meetings. These employer-school collaborations humanize the work place, increasing productivity along with employee morale as they make clear the employer's commitment to the next generation of workers.

Improving School-Based Participation

To generate better communication between schools and single and working parents, schools can be encouraged to move in a number of directions (Rich, 1985):

- be sensitive to parents' scheduling difficulties, and announce meetings and other events long enough in advance for parents to arrange for time off from work;
- create a more accepting environment for working and single parents, as well as those undergoing separation, divorce, or remarriage, or acting as a custodial parent;
- schedule teacher-parent-counselor evening meetings, with childcare;
- allow open-enrollment so that children can attend schools near parents' work places;
- provide before-school and after-school care;
- be careful about cancelling school at the last minute because of weather conditions, and leaving working parents with no resources for the care of their children;
- facilitate teen, single, working, and custodial parent peer support groups;
- provide both legal and custodial parents with regular information on their child's classroom activities, and any assistance they may need to become involved with the child's learning.

Home-Based Learning and Single and Working Parents

When parents' time for school involvement is limited, home-based learning is said to be one of the most efficient ways for parents to spend their time (Walbert, 1985). Nevertheless, teachers tend to favor parents who come to school, thus creating a cycle of positive reinforcement that leads to gains for those children whose parents come to school and shuts out parents (and their children) who are afraid or unable to do so (Toomey, 1986). Home-based learning breaks into this cycle and helps those who need help the most.

In fact, low-income single and working parents often *can* and *do* spend as much time helping their children at home as do middle-class parents with more education and leisure (Epstein, 1984, March). As with school-based involvement, it can be the teachers who hesitate to give these children work to take home, wrongly fearing that the parents will not be available to help. However,

when teachers reach out to parents, these parents are generally more than willing to help. More impressive, when teachers *help parents to help their children*, these parents can be as effective with their children as those parents with more education and leisure, whom teachers expect to help their children (Epstein, 1984, April).

The Best Ways to Help Children at Home

Recent research on parental involvement in home learning differs about how the home and school should relate. While some researchers emphasize changing what goes on in the low-income or minority home in order to create learning situations that are more consistent with school learning (Walbert, 1984; Grau, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1983), others focus more on what can be done to increase teachers' understanding of the "natural" learning that goes on in any low-income home (Brice-Heath, 1983), or even to help these families help "empower" each other (Cochran, 1987). One author concludes that the "school-to-home pathway . . . is more likely to be effective if the two-way nature of the path is explicitly recognized by educators" (Cole & Griffin, 1987).

A first step in fostering home learning is letting parents know that there are simple, time-efficient ways to help their children. This can be done in a variety of ways (Rich, 1985):

- bilingual media campaign on the important role of the home in educating children;
- support for home learning from ministers and other respected leaders;
- family learning centers in schools, storefronts, and churches that offer help (bilingual, when necessary) to parents wanting to help their children learn;
- bilingual hot-lines for parents who need help in helping their children with their homework; and
- school-designed learning activities that parents and their children can do together.

Enhanced Schooling through Parent Involvement

Home-learning projects are critical for many low-income families who do not automatically give their children the assistance and stimulation necessary for success in school. Although both schools and parents must be inventive to increase parent involvement, it is important to keep in mind that every activity a child engages in can be enriching, and that the time children spend at home with their parents can be made as educational as the time they spend in school.

—Carol Ascher

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